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East Timor : "a freedom fighter, not a criminal"

On the 20th of November, Indonesian authorities captured Xanana Gusmao in his hiding place in an underground tunnel in Dili. Subsequently, at least another 20 close associates and relatives, including his sister and brother-in-law have also been detained. An Amnesty International urgent action appeal on December 4th notes that at least one of the 20+ is reported to have been tortured to death in custody. ICRC reports that Armandine Gusmao and her husband are not now "detained" but "staying" at Indonesian Army headquarters in Dili.

Xanana himself was held incommunicado for two and a half weeks before International Red Cross officials were allowed to pay him a visit. (Red Cross rules prohibit the organization from commenting publicly on the conditions of the prisoners it visits.) During that time Xanana appeared in a taped interview with East Timorese Governor Soares (see PNB Nov'92) saying that he agreed with integration with Indonesia. But as one Timorese spokesperson noted, "It is not easy to convince the international community that a man of Xanana's calibre could change his political philosophy overnight (let alone while he is incarcerated)". In an interview with the Porutguese daily *Publico* on December 4, Bishop Belo in Dili observed, "For the past seventeen years, if any prisoner spoke in the way that Xanana has spoken, it happened as a result of torture". Belo also dismissed as "completely false, military propaganda" claims that he would call for the surrender of guerillas in specified churches.

But there is no doubting that these are "terrible times" inside East Timor as Indonesian troops wage a campaign of terror. The following information was obtained from church sources inside East Timor on 8 December and publicised in a press release issued by CIIR (Catholic Institute of International Relations) on 11 December:

"The tortures are going on every day. There has never been anything like it. Numerous people have been beaten, and some put to death, all of this continues. There is complete confirmation of everything Amnesty International has been saying since the capture of Xanana Gusmao, only things are far, far worse than that. Numerous people have been arrested and a significant number have been forced to betray others after being tortured. The reality is far, far worse than observers see from the surface. You can tell the whole world that there is no doubt about the torture and atrocities the Indonesians are committing at present. The torture even extends to the private parts of boys and girls, men and women.... The Indonesians continue to call people in for interrogation and torture. In quite a number of cases the torture is so terrible that people defect to the Indonesian side. Many people who are released look like zombies.... The lines to the prisons are tremendous, one after another people are sent in. The beatings and tortures are out of this world. Despite all this, the spirit of the young people, their desire for freedom, is more firm than before. When people are not broken by the torture, they are firm in their perspectives. For now, people are only free to pray and think." Citing information he had received from "authoritative sources", Bishop Paul Moore of the Protestant Episcopal Church said in a letter to Britain's weekly *Economist* magazine, "The situation is so bad ... that church leaders are telling people to be prepared for the worst".

The International Federation for East Timor, which includes non-government organisations in Japan, Australia, Britain, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Canada, and the US has urged UN Secretary-General Butrous Ghali "to take every measure in your power" to secure Xanana's release. There are conflicting reports suggesting that the Timorese leader will be tried under criminal law or that he will be tried under subversion law; some say in two months, others three months' time.

There is concern that the capture of Gusmao and the atrocities in Timor may cause confusion in the New York talks this month. Negotiations between Indonesia and Portugal are scheduled to take place under the auspices of UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali on Dec. 17. Mr. Gusmao's arrest and Indonesian authorities' statements that he will be put on trial have cast a pall over prospects for the talks, which are supposed to be about a negotiated international settlement on East Timor. In the *Publico* interview, Bishop Belo reminded everyone that "the arrest of an individual, even if he is the leader, does not mean the surrender of an entire people".

A recent *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial reminds the Indonesians that the talks give them another opportunity:
" ... On the face of it, Xanana's capture may seem an insurmountable blow to the East Timorese cause. It need not be. Jakarta has an opportunity to break with the threadbare policies of the past, which have depended in the final analysis on simply crushing the Timorese in body and spirit. Those policies have alienated the people of East Timor. They have attracted international condemnation.

In some ways Xanana will be more of a thorn in Indonesia's side now that he is in captivity; Fretilin supporters are already promoting him as the new Nelson Mandela. Indonesia can hardly torture its prisoner. Xanana's death or injury would cause outrage in Western Europe, North America and Australia: even Japan may find it hard to turn a blind eye. If their demands are met, Xanana's fate would be bleak. The Indonesian courts have been dishing out unconscionable sentences to unarmed protesters while all but exonerating soldiers who opened fire on them. If demonstrators get long terms in prison, what could a successful guerilla leader expect? Australians can only hope Indonesia does not go down that path. We may have recognised Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor. The UN has not. Nor have many UN members. That makes Xanana a freedom fighter, not a criminal.

This is the time for justice, not revenge. It is a time to negotiate with East Timor's most outstanding leader, not incarcerate him. After 17 years, the East Timorese should be given a say in their future. There is no-one better able to represent them than Xanana. ... Presdient Soeharto has been presented with an opportunity to take a fresh approach on Timor."